

Running head: MERTON'S THEORY OF ANOMIE/STRAIN

The Anomie Theory: A Short Study

by

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Anomie has a long history in the social sciences. Anomie has a Greek origin meaning, lawlessness, (Hilbert, 1986) without direction or purpose and was developed in the late nineteenth century by Emile Durkheim (Shoemaker, 2000). Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) first employed the concept of anomie in his doctoral thesis, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) and later wrote more about anomie in his classical work *Suicide* (1897) (Nisbet 1979, vol. 5) (Deflem, 1989). Durkheim was born in Epinal, France and taught sociology at the University of Bordeaux (Nisbet 1979, vol.5). The word “anomie” has been very popular among American sociologists in the sixties (Besnard, 1988). Walsh (2000, p. 1087) suggests, “society does not cause crime it prevents it by restraining selfish human appetites”.

Those engaged in anomie research in the 1960's were fighting against the revolt against the Chicago School of Sociology (Jaworski, 1990). Anomie first taken from the work of Emile Durkheim has been interpreted in different ways (Martin, 2000). The most notable interpretation of Durkheim's theory of anomie can be traced to Robert King Merton born 1910 (Nisbet 1979, vol. 13), who focused on the “discrepancy between goals and the means for their attainment” (Martin 2000, p. 75). Merton was born in Philadelphia, PA. and graduated from Temple University in 1931. Merton joined the faculty at Columbia University in 1941 (Nisbet 1979, vol. 13).

### **Discussion of the Theory**

Both Durkheim's and Merton's concept of anomie refers to a state of society (Deflem, 1989). Merton's theory of anomie is a theory that outlines and discusses deviant behavior (Cohen, 1965). The current tendency is to use Merton's theory of anomie in a more general form called strain theory (Scarpitti & Nielsen, 1999). It differs somewhat from Durkheim's in that Merton

argued that the real problem is not created by sudden social change, but rather by social structure that holds out the same goals to all members without giving them equal means to achieve them. It is for this reason and for the purpose of this paper anomie and strain is synonymous and will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

“Strain theory incorporates both psychological and structural explanations for crime and its dismissal would be a serious loss to criminology” (Farnsworth & Leiber 1989, p. 263). When strain is present, the question is asked, “what will a person do about it” (Cohen 1965, p. 7). Farnsworth and Leiber (1989, p. 263) also suggest, “few theories have achieved the saliency of Merton’s theory of strain and deviance. Sociologist Robert Merton first published his theory of anomie in 1938 and describes it as “cultural chaos” (Ortmann 2000, p. 1). In layman’s terms, Merton’s anomie can be a disjuncture between societal goals and legitimate means for attaining them. Anomie defeats the “basis for calculability and regularity of behavior” (Merton 1938, p. 682) and harms the general functions of social organizations (Ortmann 2000, p1).

Merton builds upon “French thinker” (Smith 2001, p. 69) Emile Durkheim’s early work of anomie or normlessness for explaining deviant behavior. Hilbert (1986, p. 4) points out that it was not Durkheim who produced the word “normlessness”, but it was Merton who first used anomie in that context. Shoemaker (2000) states that social disorganization applies to local institutional conditions, and anomie referring to larger societal conditions. Merton’s theory of deviant behavior “in which social structural and cultural patterns led to individual adaptations, which in turn resulted in differential individual aggregate rates of crime and other forms of deviance” (Menard 1995, p 136). “Anomie refers to the sociological concept as introduced by Durkheim and elaborated by Merton” (Deflem 1989, p. 7). The most important similarity between Durkheim and Merton is “the absence of a need to describe the experience of

achievement as more than a fixed goal toward which one struggled” (Gagnon & Simon 1976, p. 356).

In general, discussions it is said that Durkheim created anomie theory to explain one kind of deviance, but Merton expanded on Durkheim's theory to show a variety of deviant behavior (Hilbert, 1986). Merton's strain theory is rooted in the assumption that “delinquency results when individuals are unable to achieve their goals through legitimate channels” (Agnew 1985, p. 151). Agnew (1985, p. 151) also goes on to point out that “in such cases, individuals may turn to illegitimate channels of goal achievement or strike out at the source of their frustration in anger”. The most accepted conceptualization of anomie in criminology has been that of Merton (Martin, 2000). After 1901, anomie disappeared from Durkheim's work and was hidden by many of his collaborators (Besnard, 1988).

It has been written that Merton is an “impressive and insightful theorist” (Blau 1995, p. 5) and did not align himself with other theorists and methodologists. Unlike Durkheim, Merton does not associate anomie with sudden change, but with anomie or strains built into a social system. Merton's theory does not focus upon crime, but rather various acts of deviance, which can lead to criminal behavior. Anomie (Martin 2000, p. 83) “is not just the observable discrepancy between one's material wants and one's opportunity for achieving those wants”, but is that individuals experience from being in that situation.

Merton's idea of anomie refers to a deinstitutionalization and a demoralization of means that are a result of dissociation between cultural goals and institutional norms (Deflem, 1989). Social rejection and social stigmatism and the rejection of society's accepted goals and the means of achieving them are the crux of the strain theory (Timor, 2001). Merton notes that there are certain goals which are strongly emphasized by society (education, hard work etc.), but not

everyone has access to the means to attain these goals and this is where anomie sets in.

According to Shoemaker, (2000, p. 94) Merton's theory of anomie is defined as the "disjunction between cultural goals and structured means for achieving these goals as it affects a large number of people".

Merton presents in his arguments of strain that there are five possible reactions to anomie or strain to use as means for goal attainment (Harary, 1966) also known as the means-end theory of deviance (Shoemaker, 2000). These reactions to strain are conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion (Harary, 1966). The type of reaction that a person uses depends on the person's reaction to a cultural goal i.e. money and to a legitimate way to achieve it i.e. hard work (Scarpitti & Nielsen, 1999). One should keep in mind that Merton did not distinguish clearly between monetary success and occupational success (Menard, 1995). An attempt will be made to describe each of these reactions.

*Conformity.* Can best be described as people who continue to accept the goals sanctioned by society and the means available to them (Harary, 1966). Conformity is not considered a deviant reaction to strain. Conformity is the most common reaction in a very stable society (Shoemaker, 2000). We have both means and goals and a "positive attitude toward both" (Harary, 1966 p. 694).

*Innovation.* Is considered the first deviant reaction to strain. This reaction can best be described as the acceptance of society's cultural goals, but a rejection of the legitimate means to attain those goals (Shoemaker, 2000). Harary (1966) describes innovation as people who are sympathetic with societal goals, but find that the means are so restrictive that they turn to new ones. Innovators tend to rely on illegal means in an attempt to achieve monetary success (Scarpitti & Nielsen, 1999). The innovator would be expected to engage in theft (Shoemaker,

2000). Merton (1938) considers this prevalent in the lower class (Deflem, 1989).

*Ritualism.* Another deviant reaction to strain can be described as those who cling blindly to the means to an end in themselves after losing sight of the goals (Harary, 1966). Shoemaker (2000, p. 94) suggests that ritualism can best be described as “goals that are rejected while the means are rigidly obeyed”. Ritualists work hard, but do not attempt to achieve monetary success (Scarpitti & Nielsen, 1999). In ritualism, a person can find structure in their life by the carrying on of traditional behaviors. The ritualism displays no clear-cut example of criminal behavior (Shoemaker, 2000). This type of behavior is considered common in most societies (Deflem, 1989) and produces over conformity and can result in the lowest rates of deviance among the five modes of adaptation (Menard, 1995).

*Retreatism.* Is described as the adaptation of those who give up not only the goals, but also the means (Harary, 1966). Both the goals and the means are rejected (Shoemaker, 2000). The person fills no obligation to behave in a way that society defines as acceptable. These people can be described as the mentally ill, the homeless, societies dropouts and those who turn to drugs the least common in society (Deflem, 1989) and is most likely to occur among individuals in the lowest social strata (Menard,1995).

*Rebellion.* Harary (1966, p 693) describes this person as the “true rebel”. This person rejects the cultural goals and the legitimate means and attempts to change or replace them ( Scarpitti & Nielson, 1999). Crimes such as political revolution, terrorism and assassinations can result from (Scarpitti & Nielsen, 1999). Merton (1938) believed this reaction to be rebellion, crimes of public disorder (Shoemaker, 2000).

This comprehensive typology (Walsh, 2000) is provided by Merton (1938, p 676), and suggests that the above described reactions “refer to role adjustments in specific situations, not to

personality in toto”. Jukka Savolainen (2000) writes that Merton’s anomie theory produces two arguments: one that talks about the distribution of crime within the social unit (strain theory) and the other argument addresses the level of criminal activity in the social units (anomie theory). Savolainen (2000, p. 1022) suggests that the “American Dream” is dependant upon the “stratification of legitimate economic opportunities”. The strain theory points out that inequality increases crime rates (Kelly, 2000). When inequality is great, the higher the strain, which gives lower class individuals a reason to commit crime (Kelly, 2000).

When faced with successful individuals around them, unsuccessful individuals feel a large amount of frustration. When faced with an increase in population a division of labor is produced and this produces an increase in the moral density of the population (Krohn, 1978). William Simon and John Gagnon (1976) suggests that the conditions of the American society are met by Durkheim’s commercial society. Simon and Gagnon (1976, p. 374) suggests that Merton describes his interpretation of Durkheim’s use of the concept of anomie as a “concept referred to a property of social and cultural structure, not to be a property of individuals confronting that structure”.

Merton’s strain theory of deviance is an effort to explain the rates of crime in a given population in relation to laws (Turner, 1990). Blazak (2001, p. 986) writes that the “effects of macro-level anomie can manifest on the micro level as criminal behavior”. Criminological writings are overwhelmed with theoretical models in the discussion of anomie which suggest that the unequal distribution of wealth or opportunity as a source of criminality (Ousey & Augustine, 2001). Anomic conditions serve as “releasers” (Walsh 2000, p. 1086) of criminal behavior, which can sometimes occur at lower thresholds for some. Walsh (2000) argues that being unable to attain resources in a legitimate manner routinely generates a high degree of frustration or

strain and this leads to the quest to achieve the goal by illegitimate means.

### **Criticisms and Revisions of the Anomie Theory**

Anomie “continues to be shrouded in conceptual difficulty” (Hilbert 1986, p. 1) and “conceptual soundness” (Martin 2000, p.80). Merton’s theory of anomie has been modified by both Cloward and Ohlin and was criticized as being empirically unsupported (Menard, 1995). Walsh (2000) points out that unlike Durkheim, Merton viewed anomie as permanent condition of a capitalist society, which in effect created a disjunction between cultural goals and structural impediments. The Mertonian anomie/strain theory suggests that people are social animals who want to follow social rules, but will only break them when placed under pressure or strain (Walsh, 2000). One prominent revision that is a derivative of the Mertonian theory of anomie/strain is Robert Agnew’s general strain theory (GST) (Walsh, 2000). Agnew’s (2001) general strain theory argues that strains increase the likelihood of negative emotions like anger and frustrations and is tested by examining the effect of strain on crime. Agnew’s more generalized conception of strain offers few empirical investigations (Mazerolle, 1998).

Over the past twenty years, “strain theories have been increasingly criticized and deemphasized as dominant explanations of crime and delinquency” (Mazerolle 1998, p. 67). In an effort to invigorate the strain theory Agnew (2001) attempts to expand the theory to explain a broad range of delinquent behavior. In the early days of the Durkheim anomie theory critics argued that this theory was poorly developed in its conceptualization of power and political regulation which in sum presented points of ambiguity (Turner, 1990). Agnew (1985, p.151) provided research that argued against the notion that delinquency results from the blockage of goal seeking behavior, but rather that a major source of frustration (strain) is the blockage of



“pain-avoidance behavior”. Theorists such as Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin dominate current strain theories. While all of these theories differ, they all agree that delinquency is attributed to the inability to achieve goals through legitimate means (Agnew, 1985).

Besnard (1988) points out that Durkheim's work in anomie lacked data to thoroughly establish it. Margaret Farnsworth and Michael Leiber (1989) in their article *Strain Theory Revisited: Economic Goals, Educational Means, and Delinquency* suggested that Merton's exposition on strain was faulty because of its ambiguity. Farnsworth and Leiber (1989, p 264) point out that “Merton gave illustrations of deviance probably associated with different modes of adaptation, but did not provide propositional statements concerning the processes by which adaptive mode might effect different deviant outcomes.”

Menard (1995) points out that Merton's anomie theory is macro social and that Bernard did a much better job of presenting the macro social elements of Merton's theory. Merton (1997) lends criticism to that of the theory differential association in his writing *On the Evolving Synthesis of Differential Association and Anomie Theory: A Perspective from the Sociology of Science*, by stating that differential association only focuses on the socially structured sources and consequences of deviant behavior, indicating the theory does not say anything about how individuals depart from the norms and how that develops into deviance.

Martin (2000) recognizes that although a society might be labeled as anomic, it is still the individuals that are disconnected and that this makes much more sense in the argument that individuals are disconnected from themselves and others than rather being disconnected from society. Perhaps one of the most consistent criticisms of Merton's theory is that the theory's inability to account for how different individuals adopt different adaptations of anomie (Martin, 2000). Shoemaker (2000) points out that Agnew argues that youth's inability to escape an

unpleasant home or school experiences leads to anger and frustration, which can lead to delinquency.

### **Empirical Literature**

Larry Barnett (1970) projected the anomie theory to adult women who lived in a low-income family housing project. This study showed that religion was an antecedent condition for achievement values. Barnett's study also showed that there was no relationship between anomie and achievement values, but that education was a key variable in the study. "Higher education is associated with relatively high achievement values and with relatively low anomie" (Barnett 1970, p. 133).

Savolainen's (2000) research tested the theory of institutional anomie by measuring national homicide rates. This study concluded that "economic inequality is a strong determinant of the national homicide rates in societies characterized by weak institutions of social protection" (Savolainen 2000, p. 1036).

Menard (1995, p. 169) concluded from his study that the predictive powers of Merton's anomie theory had been "seriously underestimated" and that the levels of explained variance exceed those commonly obtained in tests of the control theory. Ortmann (2000) concluded through his research that both Durkheim's and Merton's statement concerning the availability of adequate means has a strong influence on norms. This conclusion can best be demonstrated as "You must not kill" but "You must not kill because" (Ortman 2000, p.5). In yet another study of strain suggests that macro-level strain has implications for the control of crime, delinquency and problem behavior (Brezina, Piquero & Mazerolle, 2001).

### **Value of Anomie Theory**

The theory of anomie can be linked with other theories such as cultural transmission and differential association (Cohen, 1965). The anomie theory can be also linked to more recent theories such as sub-cultures. Kelly (2000, p. 5370) suggests that anomie “has shown that for violent crime the impact of inequality is large, even after controlling for the effects of poverty, race, and family composition”.

“Although most crimes are committed by the most disadvantaged members of society, these individuals face greater pressure and incentives to commit crime in areas of high inequality”.

Agnew (2001) defines objective strains and subjective strains as derivative of the general strain theory. The strain theory has led to an explanation of middle-class delinquency (Agnew, 1985). The strain theory has its value when strain is represented as an educational expectation rather than a dysjunction based on occupational measures (Farnsworth & Leiber, 1989).

### **Conclusion**

Classic sociologists such as Durkheim and Merton have opened the world of anomie to a countless number of sociologists. The theory has demonstrated a capacity to explain delinquency among individuals and the potential to explain delinquency rates over time and between groups. The macro implications of the theory in future research should focus on additional forms of environmental hate and examine the link between aversion and delinquency (Agnew, 1985). In sum, Merton’s concept of anomie refers to a deinstitutionalization of social means and depending on the characteristics of society; five possible roles of behavior are available.

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**Outline: Anomie Theory**

I. Introduction

A. Anomie Theory

1. Durkheim (1897)
2. Merton (1938)

II. Anomie Theory: Discussion

A. Some differences between Merton & Durkheim

B. Strains in the social system cause crime. (Merton)

1. Reaction/Adaptations to Anomie
  - a. conformity
  - b. innovation
  - c. ritualism
  - d. retreatism
  - e. rebellion

III. Criticisms and Revisions

- A. Deals with individuals rather than measuring groups
- B. Cannot explain why individuals choose certain adaptations.
- C. Merton's theory does not have empirical support.
- D. Conceptual problems
- E. Status Frustration (Cohen)
- F. Differential Opportunity (Cloward & Ohlin)
- G. Emotional Strain (Agnew)

IV. Empirical Literature

- A. Low income women
- B. Measuring homicide rates
- C. Macro-Strain

V. Value

- A. Relation to inequality

VI. Summary/Conclusion

